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INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE KRAMSCH

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During her visit to the University of Texas as an invited speaker for the Texas Language Technology Center Lecture Series, Professor Kramsch agreed to discuss with Pterodáctilo *a range of topics including the role of discourse analysis and pragmatics in teaching a foreign language, effectively challenging and evaluating students, the role of public education in SLA, and her involvement with computer mediated communication research. This discussion of second language education bridges practice and theory and concludes by suggesting new possibilities for multilingualism in American universities.*

Pterodáctilo (PT): Here at UT we have a lot of students taking classes in the Spanish and Portuguese Department—approximately 4,000 every semester—and the concept of language teaching is very different here than in other places. Did you notice any difference when you moved from France to the U.S?

Claire Kramsch (CK): Yes. I was teaching French and German at MIT, which is an institution where students don't really need to have foreign languages. If they take foreign languages it's because they want to have a better all-around education. So, you are teaching these European languages but in the meantime there was also Chinese and Japanese taught at MIT. But in general I taught engineers that wanted to be able to communicate with other engineers when they went abroad, or have a more well-rounded education. I found that coming to Berkeley and to California, there are so many different languages represented in California, including Spanish of course, that learning a foreign language is almost like learning another code but not necessarily learning to get to know people beyond your borders. So Spanish is always taught as a language of California. It's a Californian language, so people use Spanish words but they mean American thoughts and that is something I'm going to be talking about this afternoon [as part of the Texas Language Technology Center (TLTC) Lecture Series; this talk can be accessed here].

This is of concern to me because we used to teach foreign languages to get to know people who live outside the borders of the United States and who see the world quite differently. But very often because of the increasingly multilingual nature of American

society and the fact that immigrants to this society are more and more anxious to keep their language rather than leave it at the door, they maintain their language in the home. Sometimes in bilingual programs they will teach it in the schools, but that language becomes almost like an American language. It loses its "foreignness" and because students have more and more to learn, although there is a slight increase in study abroad, there is not the kind of increase a globalized world would require. So people learn a foreign language but they don't have the time or the possibility of really, through the language, understanding how non-Americans feel in the rest of the world.

PT: Yes, that reminds us of a study that you published about Germans and Americans ["Toward an Intercultural Stance: Teaching German and English through Telecollaboration" *Modern Language Journal* 89:2 (2005):190-205], and they went on an Internet chat, Rob and Marie. Do you think Marie reacted negatively to Rob because she is European and she probably had contact with other countries before, whereas Rob probably hadn't had that type of experience? Do you think that was one of the reasons there was a conflict between them?

CK: Absolutely. And Marie not only comes from Germany, she comes from East Germany. So she grew up under a totally different political system and she was taught to understand the West in particular terms. You remember she had a pen-friend that didn't work out, an American pen-friend, probably for political reasons. But Rob, who in fact comes from Texas, has a different view of the world and he doesn't understand what Marie doesn't understand. Throughout the conversation he gets very distraught and very disappointed even about himself. Because he sees himself as knowing something about Germany, as having travelled, and that's what is of concern to me. There is a lot of anti-Americanism around the world and I think American youngsters should understand the roots of this anti-Americanism without feeling personally attacked. But there is something to understand, not to condone, but to understand and to understand the roots of some of that resentment.

PT: Most of the students that do learn a language here don't ever get the chance to travel abroad, so how useful is that in their lives?

CK: Yes, that's a very good question because as language educators this confronts us with the question of what are we preparing the students for? Why are we teaching foreign languages? Is it for them to be good tourists abroad and for them to be able to order cups of coffee in New Delhi restaurants or in Spain or in Latin America? Or is it to go and get a job outside the United States if the job market in the U.S becomes even lousier? Do we have to prepare the students to find employment elsewhere and in that case do they work for the government as spies for national security? Or is it, possibly, for a deeper educational purpose, which is to exercise their bodies and their vocal chords and their mouth and their whole sinews in a different way that makes them foreign to themselves? So that idea of making students foreign to themselves is the first step in making them see themselves from the outside. And so it could be to teach them skills of

defamiliarization which used to be taught when you taught literature or poetry because poets and novelists have a way of presenting everyday reality in a different way so that it opens your mind to different ways of seeing the world. Teaching a foreign language might have that purpose but then we have to teach the pedagogy of language, teaching foreign languages has to be correspondingly tailored to that goal. So we don't want grammar translation, but we also don't want the kind of blithe kind of ordering cups of coffee and looking at train schedules. We want something deeper that is going to make them, to make their usual world strange to them.

PT: Most of the studies that are being done currently are trying to incorporate this *savoir-être* in the classroom, but they are doing so at the more proficient levels. How would you incorporate it right from the beginning?

CK: There is a tension there and you're right because at the beginning levels you want to immerse them in that foreign experience so you want them to really experience moving their mouth and their lips in different ways. And you don't want to bring in English there. You want it to be all in the foreign language. On the other hand there are insights that they can have right from day one that sometimes require a little remark or comment on the part of the teacher in English because they don't understand that yet in the foreign language. So there is a tension there, but I think it's an illusion to think that you've got to wait until the fifth or the sixth semester to bring these insights to them. As soon as they have a choice, for instance, of saying well, in German, 'Grüß dich' or 'Guten Tag', or 'Ciau' or 'Aufwiedersehen' you have already a choice of register. You can say 'Ciau' to certain people, other people you have to say 'Aufwiedersehen', with some people you shake hands and with some people you don't shake hands. And there are differences in the sociolinguistic situation that already index social class, social status, age, gender, region, and I think you owe it to the students to put a little sociolinguistic flesh on the grammatical bones; to have them understand that there are different ways of saying the same thing or a similar thing and that marks differences in socio-cultural contexts. And you can do that right from the start. As soon as they have two different ways of saying something they've got a choice.

PT: We also wanted to ask you about course requirements in American universities to take a foreign language. What do you think about that policy? Do you think it should change?

CK: That's the fifty million dollar question. I don't know. I haven't made up my mind and I'm torn like many people. On the one hand I think really more Americans should learn; should have that experience of learning another language. On the other hand if you make it obligatory, it runs the risk of becoming an exercise in frustration and in sort of administrative harassment. So I'm torn. But that question comes up again and again, of course.

PT: It might be better to start younger, but that's not easy to do.

CK: I started taking German at age 12 like everybody else that was entering middle school and I had 9 years of German and by the end of 9 years I was at the same stage as people who started at age 15 and took German as a second foreign language in France. So I think when you become a young adult, an adolescent adult, your cognitive apparatus is inordinately more developed. You learn more quickly; you might learn less in depth but I don't see any difference between the people who have become German teachers in France of my generation and who started three or four years later. It's often a question of motivation, a question of psychological rewards, what society rewards. I wish American society rewarded more multilingualism but it's on its way…

PT: Do you believe in the idea that students learn better before age 15? You were talking about between 9 and 15. Before 15 years old they can be almost native speakers but after that…

CK: Yes, of course there is this notion of the critical age and puberty and whether it's 15 or 12 or 13 depending on the individual. On the one hand, that notion of a critical age has been attacked because it has been shown that given the right circumstances adults are absolutely able to be undistinguishable from native speakers. Even in the area of pronunciation and phonology which is the most difficult one. One the other hand, there are also disadvantages in passing for a native speaker. I'm a native speaker of French. When I go back to France I can't tell you how many people I shock and how terrible I feel and I am made to feel if I don't know how much a stamp costs. I have had to ask in the post office "What's the price of a stamp to send a letter to Germany?" They said, "Madame, madame, the usual," and I said, "Well, what's the usual?" It's terrible. And so I think it's not always desirable to pass for a native speaker or to be a native speaker for that matter.

PT: Another problem that we often face has to do with the concept of challenging students to perform better. What do you think should be the role of the university in challenging students today?

CK: My view on that probably comes from a French view of education which is that a state education or a public education is not there only to give access to people to, upward mobility and to good jobs, etc. That's not what public education is mainly about. Public education is to give them the cognitive, emotional and moral tools to put the system in question. Once they have reached a good job, well, then they remember their education and they start putting the system in question. So I am more revolutionary if you wish but that comes from my French upbringing where I'm reading with my American students now at Berkeley a lot of Foucault, a lot of Bourdieu, a lot of Barthes. These are all people that have put the system in question. Bakhtin put the system in question. So I don't want to just give them access to jobs that their social class would warrant. I want them to be part of the intellectual elite. That's what I want.

PT: Another problem that comes up is how specifically to evaluate our students. In discourse analysis, for example we have to evaluate students and the answer is not always black or white.

CK: There was a time in my youth when I took German in France, and we were not tested on multiple choice, we had essay questions mostly of the literary kind. We were given a poem and were asked to analyze it and we were asked to interpret it and lo and behold my professors had a way of evaluating. Now, it might be just or, or unjust but they had a way of evaluating my competency in interpreting texts, and I flunked many exams because I didn't abide by the criteria—but there were criteria. Now why can we not devise ways of assessing or evaluating the ability of students to interpret cultural events? Why does it have to be fill-in-the-blanks and true-or-false? In the name of what? Fairness? Democratic equality? But not every talent and every skill can be captured by a fill-in-the-blank or true-or-false or multiple choice test.

PT: Here at UT, we're developing video materials that deal with pragmatics, which I think is very important in the class and it's not normally taught. Do you think that is something that can be implemented in a class from the beginning of a language program?

CK: Well it depends on which framework you embed it in. If you teach pragmatics within the normative, standard language kind of framework, you're going to standardize pragmatics and say: "native speakers behave like this" and then the minute they go out on the streets they find a native speaker that doesn't shake hands or that doesn't do this or that. So that is dangerous; not only dangerous but stereotypical and totally useless. What they need to do is at the beginning levels, show snippets of videos or see in action native speakers, etc. and be given the tools to analyze and interpret their behaviors, their gestures, etc. And then speculate or be taught how to interpret in multiple ways what these people mean by behaving this or that way. There is no right or wrong way to interpret a smile. It depends on the total context. So the question you're asking is how we evaluate their contextual competence. That is almost akin to interpreting a poem. And even more difficult because a poem provides its own context that is nicely bounded, but context in itself is…the sky is the limit. However, that's the interesting thing about learning a foreign language: you are faced with gestures; with words that create a different context or echo and index yet another context. But that requires interpretive skills and negotiation of meaning which is more sophisticated than just negotiating dictionary meaning.

PT: In looking at your research, you started off with discourse analysis in second language teaching and now you've moved on to computer mediated communication. So how would you draw this path that you have taken? How did this path evolve?

CK: When I first came to MIT in '63, I was teaching a heavy load of French and German at the elementary level and I did not understand my American students. I was used to

teaching French students German and I couldn't understand what my American students did not understand about French and German culture and I was not only puzzled but also sometimes angry at them, for me not being able to come across. And so it gave me a lot to think about. And just by chance I discovered that MIT gave us teachers a library card for the Widener Library in Harvard, which gave me access to a whole lot of books that I didn't have access to at MIT because MIT was more an engineering and science university. And I discovered by chance on the shelves of the Widener Library a book on 'Heutiges Deutsch' which was written by Hugo Steger from Freiburg University, then, on the way German is used in everyday conversations and I read that and I read the transcription of these conversations and I thought to myself, "Wow! There is a whole branch of linguistics called conversation analysis and discourse analysis. What am I doing teaching conversation day-in day-out and I don't even know what conversation is." This was because I was trained in literature. I discovered discourse analysis in this way and I read everything I could put my hands on and I devoured discourse analysis. For me that was the key, but very quickly when I wrote my 1981 book on discourse analysis [*Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching*] I knew that there was culture lurking in the background. Of course, because people talk according to cultural conventions that I had to explore and when I wrote that book people told me they liked the book but they always said, "Thank you for writing a book on culture." And I didn't have the feeling that I had written on culture. I thought I had written on discourse but I could see where people where putting the two together. Okay, but, don't forget that I was at MIT and I was heavily involved in the Athena Language Learning Project and Gilbert Furstenberg came over and Gilbert and I were already at that time working together to develop ways of teaching culture through discourse. So I participated; I was one of the original principal investigators in the Athena Language Learning Project. But Gilbert's work is very much based on some of what I wrote in 1983 & 1984 on how to teach cultural constructs through discourse. So it's not that just recently I've been involved in computer language learning, but I've come back to it in another way. But leaving MIT, I was leaving very exciting work linked with artificial intelligence, what could artificial intelligence provide language teachers? But I must say I was a little frustrated because artificial intelligence never delivered on its promises and to this day has not really been able to program the computer to be able to read natural languages. I moved to Berkeley which had an inordinately richer environment to study sociocultural contexts and so I became involved with that, and then moving with the flow I became interested in multilingualism and now I'm coming back to computers that I never really left, but I'm asking other questions, deeper questions.

PT: With computers and the internet, what do you think is the future of research in second language acquisition?

CK: I find that not so much second language acquisition because second language acquisition generally is now viewed as a very specific branch of psycho-linguistics or socio-linguistics for the acquisition of one second language. I am more interested in the

general field of applied linguistics. Number one because I'm very much in touch with the Europeans and what they are doing with multilingualism. I think learning one other language is passé, I mean of course there are many people learning one language but that one language is going to have to be embedded in teaching for multilingualism and for the ability and the competence to communicate and negotiate meaning in multilingual contexts, that is, in global contexts. The more people speak English around the world the less people understand one another. So it's this irony that we're moving into an era where more and more people speak English and yet less and less do they understand one another because through English they are thinking, they speak English but they think French, or they speak English and they think Hindi. And so it becomes an invisible multilingualism behind the English that they speak and I think applied linguistics has a lot to contribute to that understanding of what it means to have a multilingual mentality, a multilingual competence. That is why I'm also interested in ecological perspectives on language learning and teaching complexity theory and ecological perspectives can give us a non-linear emergent kind of understanding of human processes, of understanding language acquisition, which is not captured by the more conventional kind of SLA.